

Cindy Brown and her husband, Harley, own the famous Laundry Apartment building in Fort Macleod, Alberta. She shared her memories of their 2004 “*Brokeback* summer” with Lauren Gurney and Jim Bond.



The Browns, *The Stairwell, The Laundry Apartment*
Fort Macleod, Alberta

Interview with Cindy Brown, Owner of the Laundry Apartment

July 20, 2007

Fort Macleod is your home?

Yes, born and raised. I lived 20 miles south of town on a farm near Pincher Creek. I went to school here. My great-grandfather lived on the same homestead I grew up on; my aunt and uncle still live there.

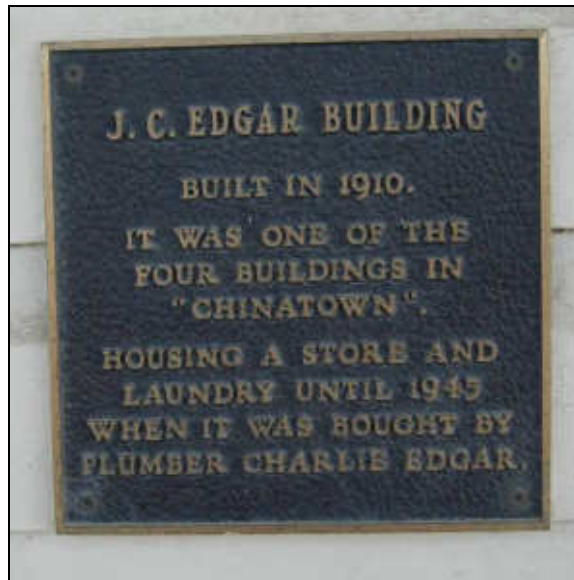
Harley is a local boy, but we did not meet until he came back to Fort Macleod from college. He was four years ahead of me. I remember seeing him but I did not really get to know him until later. We happened to be at the same party one day! Now, we have been together 18 years. It’s hard to believe it!

Harley’s dad was into horses. He was a farrier [one who shoes horses]. I think he worked for UFA; they sold gas to farmers. Harley was selling cars and I was working at a grocery store, the IGA. One day the photo business came up for sale. The guy who owned it was looking for somebody to buy his business. He did not want a lot for it at the time, so we did. Of course, we have expanded it since then, changed it, but at that time it was a One Hour Photo shop.

Initially, we just rented the front part of the building. Gradually, we started to add things. We began doing custom framing. Later they approached us to become a Radio Shack dealer; that was about eight years ago. Radio Shack was owned by Intertan; they had a license to use the name "Radio Shack" in Canada. Somehow they lost the license so we are not Radio Shack anymore, but we still have the same suppliers. We are an independent dealer. We pay for the sign and a certain amount of supplies. Electronics is the store's main business now, but we have to keep up with Best Buy, etc.

You later acquired the building?

We had been in it five or six years and had expanded. The owner, Mr. Edgar, was retiring and wanted to sell it and the apartments. He did not want to deal with it any more. It was a good opportunity.



Historical Plaque
The Source (*Brokeback's* Liquor Store)

When was the first time you heard about *Brokeback Mountain*?

Darryl Solly [locations manager] walked in out of the blue one day. He asked to look at the building. Harley showed him all three apartments.



Michael Hausman, Ang Lee, and Judy Becker
April 2004

Then I remember the next time when Darryl came in, I was there. He said “I think we are interested.” But, of course, there was a tenant up there, so they had to get on her good side. Then the director had to come through and see it, as well.

Who lived there?

Most tenants are young people; they tend to move in and out. But Margaret, the lady who lived in the (Laundry Apartment), she was there for 12 years. She was a single lady with kids. She had left her husband a long time ago. Anyway, they moved her stuff and put her up in a hotel and paid for her food. She might have been a bit cranky at the end because they told her they would take two weeks and it turned out to be three or four. But it was good for her, too. That is a sad story, though. She got quite a bit of money from the production, and then she died of cancer less than a year afterwards. Margaret was a good tenant.

The others always come and go. Reggie lived in Apartment #1. He was very adept at securing gratuities. We had no idea that you could get your picture taken there for a fee until we read about it on your website. We did not know that was going on!

Then there was a guy in the middle apartment. We had problems with him; we should have kicked him out. He could not get in and out of his apartment while they were filming so they put him up in a hotel for a few days. But he would keep coming back saying “I need to get something.” Later, he said that they broke his bike. I think they paid a month’s rent for him to smooth things over.

What did the filmmakers say to you about the movie itself?

Harley had read the short story and knew what it was about. We thought, “Oh, it will be a fine, low-budget movie; we’ll never hear about it again.” That is what we thought. We did not dream it would be nearly as popular as it has become. Had we known, we might have left the apartment the way it was when they were filming!

Most of the filming was done in June 2004.

Yes, but they talked to us four to six months ahead of time. And of course, they were working there for a couple of months before they started filming.



Pre-Production Activity
June 2004

During this time they were talking to people in Fort Macleod about other locations?

Oh yes. Darryl would come in and say, “Do you know anybody who has an old barn?” or whatever, or “We need this” and “We need that.” It was good that they found other things to film in this area. They filled every motel in town and they did a lot of good for Fort Macleod.

They were talking to other people, too. I know they were talking to some business owners on Main Street. They wanted to do a Main Street scene [reportedly a Fourth of July Parade] but two building owners got greedy and so they never did.

Describe your relationship with the filmmakers.

Darryl was very good, and there was a fellow named Jay [St. Louis, assistant locations manager]. Darryl was "Whatever you need." And Jay was always, "I don't know if we can do that." So they worked well together.

They were very good about everything. "Can you water the lawn? *We'll pay you!*" "Can we store something here? *We'll pay you!*" "Can we do this? *We'll pay you!*" And I think we got paid well. They paid us for the filming and for the loss of business.

Right at the beginning they told us that we could meet the actors; we never did get to do that. But they got us in up-close when they made the scene at the ball diamond. Jay got us very close to the front of the crowd that night.



Alma, Ennis, the Swings
June 2004

They were all great to work with; we did not have any trouble with anybody. They were very accommodating and did what we asked.

They would propose building modifications to you?

Yes, lots of painting. And they had to enclose the stairwell to hide them. Many of the changes had to do with making the apartment appear to be over a laundry and next to a liquor store. They put a sign up and some stuff inside.

How much of the kitchen area was authentic?

They put the stove and refrigerator in. The counter was already there. They hauled that old stove and water heater in there. They painted and paneled. And put in a steam vent downstairs. Inside, they put in brown linoleum.



April 2004



June 2004

It is a much nicer apartment than it appeared to be in the film. It has high ceilings. The other two apartments we have there are smaller.

At some point did they say “We are ready”?

We had about a month’s notice. We were told it would be filmed during the first week of June. And we thought, “Great, we’ll go away,” since it is hard for us to get away with the business. But then as the time got closer, it became a day here and a day there. So it did change around.

We actually closed the store for three days. Unless they were actually filming, we were open for business. They filmed for three days.

I was in the store one day while they were filming. Heath Ledger kept coming out of the apartment, and coming out of the apartment, and coming out of the apartment! He slammed that door many, many times.

Harley met Ang Lee a couple of times; I never did. He said Lee was very interesting. Lee told him “Come on, we’ll get you in the movie somewhere,” but Harley was not interested.



Filming at the Laundry Apartment
June 2004

I remember them working into the night. And those lights! Especially for the Fireworks scene. We were out there until 2:00 in the morning! And after we returned home we finally heard the fireworks go off at 4:00! I remember it being cold; we had to have blankets.

My uncle was out there that night. He owned a couple of vehicles that were in the movie. The one Jake drove, the blue truck, it belongs to him. I saw him driving it yesterday. He supplied them with an old car, as well. I do not know if you can see it in the movie, but he had a car in there, too.



Jack's Blue Truck

Why does your Apartment #3 become Apartment #2 in the film?

I do not know. I do not know if there was even a number on it before the film was made. I remember putting a number on it afterwards, but it might not have even had a number on it before.



June 2004



July 2007

After the filming, they left it as it was for a long time, just to make sure everything was proper and they did not have to go back, I suppose.

And then did they restore the apartment?

Yes, they painted whatever colors Margaret wanted. They did use cheap paint on the outside of the building. It was not very good quality; it has been flaking off. If we do this again we'll be pickier about the paint. [Laughter]

They restored the interior and the exterior; they were very good about that. There was a window that got broken and they fixed that. They took the stairwell enclosure down. They removed the grass. They re-graveled the parking lot, and made everything look the same as it had originally.

It must have seemed strangely quiet after that.

Yes, there had been so much hustle and bustle. When they were here there was always somebody saying to us "Can we go here?" "Can we go there?" "We need this." "We need that." Then they all left.

Later the movie came out.

Oh, yes. It received a lot of publicity. I think it came out in Venice? Is that where we first saw it got an award? We heard it won awards. They had a big deal here in town; they showed it at the Empress Theatre and sold tickets. It was like a big opening and the theatre was packed.



Fort Macleod *Brokeback Mountain* Premier
January 19, 2006

You saw your building on the big screen?

Yes. "There it is!" I saw the movie a few times. Now, when I watch another movie, I wonder where that building is. I think, "Whose house is that?" I wonder if they will restore it when they are done!

You'll never enjoy a movie again! [Laughter] What was the local reaction?

There were a couple of letters to the editor about our "wholesome faces" being in the movie, but Harley and I never heard a thing about it at all.

It was interesting during the special showing in the [Empress] theatre because it was noisy. You know how people can be noisy, eating popcorn, whispering, and all. But when a couple of those scenes came on when they were together, you know, you could hear a pin drop. The theater got so quiet!

Well, perhaps the most electrifying kiss in film history occurred on your stairwell. Did you know that had happened?

We had an idea. That day I was supposed to meet them, the actors, but I was told, "No this is going to be a very sensitive scene so they can't talk with anyone." We had an inkling. Yes, and Harley knew that is why they built that stair enclosure. He knew that beforehand.

There is also a scene where Ennis and Alma are intimate.

I don't think that was done here, but I am not sure. The bedroom was set up but I do not think that was filmed here. There were clothes in the closets. He [Ennis] grabs a suitcase from the back bedroom closet.

People in your position often keep souvenirs. Did you?

I heard a plate was missing from the Java Shop. But I do not think anybody thought the film would create the fuss that it has. Not that it would go on to win awards and all that. Movies come and go. At the time, we thought *Brokeback* would be like that.

I took a photo of the del Mar wedding picture. And we have some pictures of our kids sitting on their couch! And we have great memories.



del Mar Wedding Photo

At some point, you might try to explain to your kids what the movie is about.

We have not gotten to that yet! [Laughter]

To many people, the Laundry Apartment is a very special symbol and a highly emotional place.

Yes, people come here from all over the world. We look outside all of the time and there they are, on the steps, and we say "There's another one." And that is fine; we have no problem with that.

Thank you and Harley for welcoming the *Brokeback* community, and thank you for sharing with us today.